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## The Empire Strikes First

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**W**ASHINGTON

There was no smoking gun last night. There was merely a smoky allusion.

President Bush tried to sell skittish Americans on a war with Iraq by alluding to the possibility of a link between Saddam and Al Qaeda.

Outlaw regimes seeking bad weapons, Mr. Bush said, "could also give or sell those weapons to terrorist allies, who would use them without the least hesitation."

The axis of evil has shrunk to Saddam, evil incarnate. Iran and North Korea were put aside with the dismissive comment: "Different threats require different strategies."

The state of the union is skeptical.

At a moment when Americans were hungry for reassurance that the monomaniacal focus on Iraq makes sense when the economy is sputtering, Mr. Bush offered a rousing closing argument for war, but no convincing bill of particulars.

Republican senators tried to back up the president. While admitting that there was no evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction yet, John Warner told reporters that an attack was justified "if you put together all the bits and pieces that are out there right now."

Americans will never understand the Bush rationale for war if they simply look at the bits and pieces of physical evidence.

They will understand the Bush rationale for war only if they look at the metaphysical evidence, the perfect storm of imperial schemes and ideological stratagems driving the desire to topple Saddam.

The Bush team thinks the way to galvanize the public is with fear, by coupling Saddam to 9/11 and building him up into a Hitler who could threaten the world, as the White House chief of staff, Andy Card, told Tim Russert last Sunday, "with a holocaust."

But their reasons for war predate 9/11. The conservatives have wanted Saddam's head for a dozen years.

Dick Cheney; his chief of staff, Scooter Libby; and the Pentagon official Paul Wolfowitz also think Saddam is the perfect lab rat on which to test their new pre-emptive "empire strikes first" national security strategy, which Mr. Wolfowitz and Mr. Libby first drafted back in 1992, during the Bush 41 administration, when Mr. Cheney was defense secretary.

The first President Bush found the ideas too far out. But now his son has put them into play. Bush 43, former prep school football yell leader, is reputed to be the author of the phrase in the new national security strategy that sums up the policy: "We recognize that our best defense is a good offense." (Didn't Sunday's Super Bowl prove that the best defense is a good defense?)

After removing the super-rat, Mr. Wolfowitz, Mr. Libby and their fellow hawk Richard Perle can turn his country into a laboratory for democracy in the Arab world — creating a domino effect to give Israel more security. Once they have planted Athenian democracy on Mesopotamian soil, they envision orchestrating more freedom throughout the Middle East — as long as the region plays ball with the new sheriff. They'll put pressure on Syria and Iran to abandon their support for terrorism. And then, with an American spigot, the oil will flow free — except to the French, who will pay dearly.

Mr. Rumsfeld sees a war with Iraq as a chance to exorcise American ambivalence about the use of force left over from Vietnam, and the "pinprick bombings" of the Clinton years. And Mr. Cheney sees it as an opportunity to exorcise all the ghosts of the 60's and the feel-good Clinton era — the loss of moral authority and the feeling that America is in decline or in the wrong.

The vice president jumped up last night to cheer brawny unilateralism when Mr. Bush said: "The course of this nation does not depend on the decisions of others."

Despite its fixation on Saddam, the administration hasn't completely forgotten about Osama. The Economist ran an ad this week that said: "For over 100 years Arab-Americans have served the nation. Today we need you more than ever. . . . For additional information and to apply online, please visit our website at [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)."

The C.I.A. is seeking Arabic-speaking agents.

Now they get around to that?

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